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THE WRITING OF ETHNOGRAPHY:
MAGICAL REALISM AND MICHAEL TAUSSIG[1]

*Language is not a medium; it is a constitutive element of material
social practice… Language is in fact a special kind of material
practice: that of human sociality.*

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

Introduction: Establishing the Ground of Contestation

THE CURRENT EPISTEMOIOGICAL CRISIS IN THE WEST has had an interesting and productive affect on the writing of ethnography. Ethnography, a method of knowledge acquisition, development, and dissemination has become suspect under the pressure of this challenge and many have risen to address it. Scholars from such disciplines as Anthropology, Religious Studies, Sociology and Women's Studies who employ the ethnographic method, must engage fully the crisis but in this engagement there is much to gain. Toward examining the impact of the epistemological crisis, this paper first explicates the problem, some of the issues related to the problem, and then intersects with the genre of Magical Realism through one ethnographer's critically creative reply to the crisis of the "posts": Michael Taussig's magical realist ethnography, *The Magic of the State* (1997).

The crisis in knowledge has affected all disciplines, or at least those disciplines that are self-conscious about the production of knowledge. This current crisis is of course a product of the rise of feminisms, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcoloniality. Noticeably three of these epistemological locations claim the "post" or after-modernity position. They self-consciously engage in the paradigm of thinking found in modernism, structuralism, and colonialism, but deconstruct their

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parent location and underscore its limitations. Feminism, as an umbrella term, does not claim the declarative "post," but it could be called, with a fair amount of justification, postpatriarchalism. The four epistemic movements I have named here have called into question the who or knower (e.g., situated knowledge), the how or knowing (e.g., language), and the what or known (e.g., reason) of knowing.[2] Equally they have raised the issue of the why of knowing, and how knowledge and power are intimately linked. Those institutions considered that the repositories of knowledge are often linked to hegemony. Knowledge and knowledge production, although contested in some quarters, continued to operate in some ways, i.e., in universal truths quite unproblematically until circa 1960.[3] Without developing a history of knowledge production in the West, and its various manifestations and contestations (the latter seen most emphatically in the science of hermeneutics) my claim that 1960 marks a turning point in the emergence of specific contestatory discourses, which produce a crisis in knowledge, is reflected in the work of such theorists as, e.g., Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Simone de Beauvior, and Frantz Fanon.

The "posts" engaged knowledge in such a way as to generate a crisis in the production of knowledge as a social, historical, political, and cultural category. Certainly, within disciplines prior to 1960 there was argumentation about the interpretation of issues, development of taxonomies, and so forth, but the production of knowledge as a self-interested, political, and hegemonic enterprise was not critically engaged in any broad fashion regardless of the fathers of suspicion—Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. When indeed such questions began to be raised, the question often was manifested as: "Well what are the facts and how can I, as an academic, get at them?" It is at this juncture that the ethnographic turn as a way to grasp the "real" of existence came into play.

In terms of Western epistemological concerns, the ethnographic turn (circa 1960) is indicative of a disciplinary method used in anthropology that was taken over by other disciplines, such as Religious Studies in an attempt to pan nuggets of the real and the true in terms of experience. Ethnography in the early 20th century was manifested as knowledge acquisition and consisted of field work, wherein as Bronislov Malinowski (1884-1942) charged, one rubbed elbows with the other as a means to encounter truth—armchair anthropology was de-legitimized. But at the same time this form of knowledge acquisition was being borrowed by other disciplines, ethnography also came under fire for the epistemological assumptions

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[2] For a discussion of knowers, knowing and known in the feminist paradigm see Mary Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth." *Signs*, vol. 14 no. 3, 1989: 533-557.

[3] In terms of the dissemination of something called "normative knowledge," knowledge grounded in a positivistic scientific paradigm, I follow Sandra Harding in arguing that this kind of tunnel vision produced in and by the West has only been called into question in the last few decades. See Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural?: Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 21-38.

inherent to it. Ethnography assumed that inductive reasoning, the moving from the particular to the general to the universal in terms of the production of knowledge, was unproblematic[4] and did not in any significant way call into question the issue of the subject and object division: ethnography did not self-reflectively understand that the discipline's act of writing the other into existence was a colonizing act.

It is to the issue of knowledge production in the ethnographic moment that this paper will address itself. More specifically, I will interrogate how ethnography acts as knowledge production, explore inherent challenges faced by those who use the ethnographic method, and discuss how some have sought to address this epistemological conundrum and the implications arising from their forms of address. It is not my intention to deconstruct and leave in pieces ethnography as an epistemological method, but rather to continue to probe the issue of knowledge production itself.

Subjects and Objects: Attempts to Transcend Binarism

The writing of ethnography made clearly visible the subject and object distinction. Under the influence of the previously mentioned "posts," the potential to colonize the other in the writing of the ethnographic text became evident. Ethnographers of the early 20th century did not address this problem; indeed, part of the problem that many sought to address was the issue of authenticity. To write ethnography was problematic when never having been among those peoples about whom one purported to be an expert. The issue of inductive reasoning used in scientific study was a form of reasoning seen as most appropriate for studying people and making that study relevant to the academic community. Drawing methodology from natural sciences, social sciences introduced the conceptualization of a rule-based study that would provide a necessary veracity to the study of peoples. These studies could not only contribute to the study of cultures and societies, but could also act as the definitive means by which to understand and predict human behaviour. The logic of deductive reasoning, beginning with a generalization and seeking to apply it to particulars was seen to be problematic. In this kind of formulation, it was felt that the ethnographer would distort the data so that the data would conform to his or her theoretical premises. This did not mean that the ethnographer did not have questions in mind; rather, she/he should not have answers in mind. Then, like the archival historian, the ethnographer would enter the field (archives) and learn about whatever phenomenon she/he had in mind to study. In this way, she/he documented the phenomenon in action, thereby providing an authentic study. But with the rise of feminist, postmodern, poststructural, or postcolonial challenges to the epistemological problems of

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[4] For a discussion of the rise of and problems with inductive reasoning see Mary Poovey, *History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society.* (Chicago and London:

knower, known, and knowing, the ethnographic method was seen to be complicit in objectifying the focus of one's study. As Michel de Certeau has argued:

> [f]our concepts appear to organize a scientific field whose status was established in the eighteenth century and which Ampère entitled 'ethnology': orality (communication within a primitive, savage or traditional society), spatiality (the synchronic picture of a system that has no history), alterity (the difference which a cultural break puts forward), and unconsciousness (the status of collective phenomena, referring elsewhere).[5]

In terms of writing, the process was one of bringing the other (them) into the frame of the same (us), although they remained other (them) and under control of the same (us). Writing brought into consciousness what was deemed unconscious, inscribing and locating what was ephemeral and always in the present (lacking history) and ultimately allowed what was other to remain as such but clearly under the control of the same. In this writing of alterity it becomes apparent that the colonizing of the other, be it the "south-worlds," the "primitive," or the female—all those marked in some fashion within a hegemonic discourse—is effected. In the writing of ethnography the knower, known, and knowing are in the hands of the ethnographer. Although she/he may engage an informant, the knowledge is always transcribed by the ethnographer who has the knowledge to know the other in a way they could never know themselves. Clearly the subject location belongs to the master narrator—the ethnographer—and clearly the object location belongs to that of the observed, the ethnographer's datum. In terms of appropriation of voice (feminism), of re-colonization (postcolonialism), of the mediation through language (poststructuralism) and Archimedean point or the unsituated theorist (postmodernism), the writing of ethnography, like western epistemology, faced a crisis.

Several attempts have been made in the fields of Religious Studies and Anthropology to address this problem.[6] Some thought that if the product of their study was co-authored with their informant, that in turn, this could address the problem of appropriation and colonization; however, the unsituated theorist remained a problem. Others thought to address the issue of speaking from nowhere (Archimedean point) by situating themselves in terms of the locality of the study (in the field) or in terms of a locality of the ethnographer (in the university), or both. A certain reflexivity was introduced into the writing of the ethnography. No longer was the ethnographer absent. Rather her/his thoughts, interactions, insights, problems, and day-to-day experiences were introduced in the

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writing of the ethnographic record.[7] Added to this, and delineated in terms of an ethics of caring, it was felt by some there should be some form of return to the community one studied, be it in the form of economic support attained through a governmental institution, supporting NGOs in an attempt to assist the community, instruction of some sort to the community, or possibly technological assistance, e.g., the building of a well. As ethical rejoinders, some of these (liberal) responses worked. But in all these attempts, the difficulty of dealing with the object-subject binary in terms of representation has not been successful. The problems of appropriation, mediation through language, the Archimedean point, and re-colonialization are integral to Western history and cannot be ignored; instead, they must be fully engaged. The process should not be an attempt to transcend binarism, but to walk into the middle of the conundrum.

Writing and the Colonization of the Other: Ipseity/Alterity

Edward Said, Trinh T. Minh-Ha,[8] and Michel de Certeau, among others, have effectively laid bare the process of "otherfication" in terms of knowledge production. In his various writings, Certeau has demonstrated an abiding interest in the concept of alterity. Alterity, according to the OED is defined as "[t]he state of being other or different; diversity, 'otherness.'" As an ideological concept acting as an epistemological unit, alterity is in an oppositional binary relationship with ipseity (self) and in an analogical relationship with them (vs. us), margin (vs. center), primitive (vs. civilized), nature (vs. culture), and orality (vs. written), to name but a few. Ipseity, according to the OED, is defined as "personal identity and individuality; selfhood." To some theorists alterity appears to be positively charged. This is due, I think, to it being paradoxical in that it is both empty, empty in terms of absence (it lacks self), and full, full of otherness (all that which the category of the same cannot contain).[9] Nonetheless, it does not exist other than in a binary relationship with ipseity as self/other or ipseity/alterity. Without self, the other (alterity) does not exist and, equally, without the other, self (ipseity) does not exist.[10] Alterity is a concept that currently operates in relation to the logic of

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[7] For a variety of ways to write ethnography and discussions about autoethnography and other forms of authorial reflexivity see Irma McClaurin, ed., *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics.* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers 2001) or Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, eds., *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing.* (Walnut Creek, London, New Dehli: Altamira Press, 1996).

[8] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[9] This is a value that some thinkers have invested their theories with, for example Luce Irigaray. "The stranger, like other tropes, is a politically informed account of alternative subjectivity" Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists.* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), xiv.

[10] "The 'Other' in the work of Michel Foucault, for instance, consists of those who are excluded from positions of power, and are often victimized within a predominantly liberal humanist view of the subject." (Stewart Sim, ed. *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought.* [New York: Routledge, 1999], 181.) And "[A]ll cultures thus create a division of humanity between themselves on the one hand, a representation par excellence of the human, and the others, which only participate in humanity to a lesser degree. The discourse that primitive societies use for themselves, a discourse condensed in the names they confer upon themselves [Ava, men; Ache, persons;

colonialization, be it of the female, animals, the earth, or the feminized male.

In terms of hegemony, alterity is the other against which the dominant group recognizes itself as dominant. Therefore, the category of alterity is a double-edged sword, one that can cut both ways: the same is dependent upon the other to exist as the same. Those who have resisted colonization, many of the marginalized and some who occupy the position of the center, have recognized this and have taken up the category of alterity in order to subvert the category of ipseity, and in the process underscore the inherent power in the category of the other. However, hegemonic powers typically contain many means by which to maintain their position of power. The absorption of alterity in order to nuance ipseity has been one of these means. For example, an appropriative movement that has occurred in the last several decades has been multiculturalism (the reverse of melting pot ideology). Although seen as a positive move, wherein difference throughout the demographic body of the state is embraced, this act is simply a symbolic gesture of inclusion at its best. In terms of order and structure of the state, the same (or hegemony/homogeneity) operates as an umbrella overseeing, neutralizing and therefore controlling the differences in the entirety of the state. Difference is allowed only insofar as it works toward empowering hegemony. In this manner, multiculturalism is seen to enrich the state in its body (culture seen in food, colour, or literature), but is never present in terms of its head (operative governmental power, economic power, or epistemological power)—alterity, in this instance, is in service of the state.

Understanding the difficulty of engaging a binary construction, such as alterity/ipseity, is the first step toward engaging the category of alterity critically. Clearly flipping the binary and altering its pole of valuation–negative is positive and positive is negative–does not challenge the logic itself and addresses only the ordering of its contents. As Bruce Lincoln notes, inversion is a useful strategy for revealing the logic of a system, but it is often questionable as a serious challenge to the system. He argues "[t]o be sure it is a powerful act to turn the world upside down, but a simple 180-degree rotation is not difficult to undo. An order twice inverted is an order restored, perhaps even strengthened as a result of the exercise."[11]

Writing and the Accounting of Ipseity/Alterity

In terms of writing ipseity and alterity, an even greater problem arises.

Yanomami, people; Inuit, men], is thus ethnocentric through and through … It is part of a culture's essence to be ethnocentric, precisely to the degree to which every culture considers itself the culture par excellence. In other words, cultural alterity is never thought of as positive difference, but always as inferiority on a hierarchical axis." (Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence* in *Semiotext(e)*. Jeanine Herman, trans. [MIT Press, 1994], 46.)

[11] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification*. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159.

Colonialization of the other in geopolitical terms was a long process of conquest, genocide, settlement, commodification, and exploitation. Focused on the "new world," this was a process that began with "discovery" in the late 15ᵗʰ century. Throughout this long process writing the other and the other of the other (the female other) was a significant and central aspect of establishing the alterity of non-Europeans. Travelogues that began with the protagonist — the European — moving from the center, Europe, to the margins of the new worlds established the parameters of the discourse.[12] The "native" was "other" in terms of being exotic, savage, cannibalistic, sexual, and pre-Christian as opposed to, and in relation with, the European "same" who became, in terms of this binary: familiar, civilized, culinary, chaste, and Christian.[13] The encounter with the other was an experience of the primal, the authentic, and the real that became the narrativization of the other. Ultimately, these travelogues became one source of knowledge for the other. The writing of the other was a process of naming and therefore defining and claiming the other in terms of Western epistemology. Writing is an act of knowledge production, and the other became the object in terms of Western knowledge production. As a resulting, writing is suspect in terms of its colonizing potential.

Writing and Knowing the Constructed World

If writing is a potential act of colonialization, how can it be reclaimed as a challenge to colonialization? Hayden White, a theorist of writing, describes in *The Content of the Form* (1987), different genres in the writing of history: annals, chronicles, and history proper. In the first two forms there is a lack of analysis and narrativization, a lack that calls into question whether they are proper histories. White notes Peter Gay's comment that "historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete."[14] Equally, ethnography requires the same kind of engagement to be ethnography; narrativization must be employed. However, as noted above it is precisely this narrativization laying claim to the other. How then should one engage narrativization in such a way as to resist colonialization? White, in his examination of history, notes that in this act of narrativization current genre forms are engaged in order to relate the history. These genre forms provide a structure for the telling of the events. White's theory of historiography argues that history has an explanatory structure. It seeks to provide a meaning, a "kind" of story, i.e., Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, or Satire, or to form an argument — the point of it all, what it adds up to, or the ideological implications — a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it (either to change the world or to maintain it in its

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[12] For an extended discussion on the subject of European travelogues see Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 209-243.
[13] For a complete discussion of this binarism see Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 209-243.
[14] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative, Discourse and Historical Representation.* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 5.

current state).[15] These forms of explanation are extrapolated within narrative structures that create the form and define the meaning of history, and that are dependant upon generic story types that are meaningful to the historical period of the interpreter.[16] The writing of history, whether as some fortuitous end or a fall from grace, is a formulaic narrative engaged in order to shape the momentary events into a specific telling, a telling that makes sense to the interpreter/historian. From the historian's social embeddedness, a random event or events will be invested with historical signification. Accordingly, Roland Barthes, arguing from a structuralist/poststructuralist position, asks:

Does the narration of past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onwards, has generally been subject to the sanction of historical 'science,' bound to the underlying standard of the "real," and justified by the principles of "rational" exposition—does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama?[17]

Equally, this same act of narrativization is engaged in ethnography; random events are folded into a telling—a story—about a group, a clan, a moiety, a society or a culture. It is in the shaping (telling) of events into a discernable narrative (romance, epic, comedy, tragedy or chronicle) that one can tell "a wink from a blink." In other words, the meaning of it all (the study) reveals itself through the narrative form.

Understanding that ethnography is subject to narrativization is the second move toward critically engaging it. Primarily this is because understanding that narration is an act of social creation means that the writer cannot help but be cognizant of her/his position in the narrative, the position of master narrator. In the past, the author as master narrator, was absent from the ethnography,[18] but by understanding the colonial implications of the role of the master narrator, it became increasingly necessary for those who use ethnography to account for themselves in their ethnographic productions: hence, the strategy of autoethnography. However, as a strategy, autoethnography has its pitfalls, the most salient being the implicit claim to authentic voice. The ethnographer as writer of the text continues, regardless of her/his emplacement in the text, to hold the position of narrator and although omniscience by her/his presence is made impossible, the position of the authentic knower is not. As the authentic knower she/he translates and interprets for the reader. Although not omniscient, she/he remains an authentic knower in relation to her/his subjects of analysis and the readers of the text. Equally

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[15] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe.* (Baltimore and London: the John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.
[16] See White, *Metahistory*, 6-31 for an extended discussion.
[17] Barthes in White, *The Content of the Form*, 35.
[18] There have, however, been exceptions, e.g., Zora Neale Hurston.

problematic is the writer's maintenance of the position of the same in counter-distinction to those others she studies. It may be that when the ethnographer enters the culture of the group that is the subject of her study she may be in the position of the stranger (and therefore other to the other) but when the process of narrativizing (writing) is engaged, she, as the writing/speaking human subject in the text, is fixed at the center. Furthermore, in terms of presentation, language and readership, and the academic world she operates within (those who are the primary consumers of ethnography), she is equally fixed at the center. Finally, even the genres that will be used to tell the story will locate the ethnographer and her world at the center; ultimately, the place and people she encounters and studies remain fixed on the margins. How, then, can one move through the process of writing ethnography without colonizing/narrativizing those about whom one writes?

Narratology and Ethnography: Transgressing the Binary: The Category of Magical-Realism

Magical Realism is possibly a genre[19] of writing that blurs the line between the "real" and the fantastic and so may offer a solution to the conundrum of narrative otherfication, as I will argue shortly. Franz Roh, a German Art critic who felt it to be an art category, introduced the term in 1929. Theoretically developed by Alejo Carpentier as lo real-marvilloso[20] and used by a number of "south world" writers such as Ben Okri, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Anna Castillo, as well as Southern Black American writers such as Toni Morrison, it is a form of writing that employs paradoxes in relation to time, reality, and space. The past, present, and future run alongside each other, interwoven and at times undifferentiated; space is a montage in which the center and periphery are overlaid or overlapping; reality and truth are separated and their inherent relationship called into question by the revelation of fantasy and desire residing between the two. In magical realism, irony and tragedy operate as the face behind the mask of the comedy that underscores tragic futility. In this equation, the real is the colonialist overlay that imperils life and culture, while the fantastic is that which operates in direct antithesis to the European super-civilization in an attempt to negotiate the persistence of colonial memory,[21] in the hope of creating a future that neither represses the past nor is permanently mutilated by it. Rather, freedom is potentialized by simultaneously

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[19] There is some discussion as to whether magical realism is an actual genre of writing differentiated from fantasy. Because of its use of historical events and its obvious political critique I believe it to be a genre unto itself and not fantasy. But because I am not a literary critic and do not operate in the field of English or Literature, I would be disinclined to attempt a definitive statement in regard to its genre status.

[20] Edwin Williams, "Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*." In Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell eds., *Gabriel García Màrquez: New Readings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45–64.

[21] For an interesting discussion of the disabling persistence of colonial memory see Jeremy Adelman , ed., *Colonial Legacies: The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History.* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

holding in one hand dystopia (ill-place) and utopia (non-place) to establish a hybrid, dis-place (other place) or "heterotopia." In magical realism the everyday is the marvilloso found in the intricacies and drama of living a desperate life. It is the desperate living that formulates a desperate history making visible the potential for society not to be this way. Several key concepts that emerge and establish the telling as magical realism are related to, as indicated: space in terms of inner and outer; center and periphery and the text; time in terms of linearity; and reality in terms of its construction.

Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987), exemplifies quite wonderfully the challenge to the binary opposition of inner and outer space. In this novel, one encounters the character Sethe who is locked in her house and tormented by the ghost of her child, Beloved, whom she murdered in a desperate act to keep her from re-enslavement. This ghost-child dominates the inner-world of the house, but the ghost-child has come into existence because of the outer-world of American slavery. Sethe, in a long and arduous journey has escaped to freedom, but those who would own her and her children have arrived to return her and the children to the condition of slavery. Sethe attempts to kill all the children for she believes death is a preferred state to enslavement:

> When the four horsemen came [allusions to the Apocalypse of
> course]—schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a
> sheriff—the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they
> were too late…Right off it was clear, to the schoolteacher especially,
> that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four—because
> she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped
> were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and
> raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were
> not.[22]

The outer-world, or the real world, is one of injustice and horror for Blacks during the period of slavery in the United States. This injustice and horror slipped into Sethe's inner-world, into her home and mind that were both at one time a sanctuary—an injustice; horror manifested by the petulant and highly destructive ghost-child. Sethe is held hostage in her home, overwhelmed by her guilt for the murder and attempted murder of her children. However, the outer-world will step in again, but this time in a restorative manner, as it is only through the actions of the women of the Black community, who exorcise the ghost-child, that the home and mind of Sethe are freed from the horror, injustice, and guilt produced by slavery and signified by a hurtful ghost-child. The space or boundary between outer and inner is merged in the novel so that the inner-world is understood as conditional to the outer-world. This leads to an awareness that the two cannot be separated. The binary opposition between the inner and outer is a boundary

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[22] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. (New York: Knopf, 1987), 148-149.

referring to all boundaries that are, in Magical Realism, "fold[ed] and refold[ed] like quicksilver, … superimpos[ing] themselves upon one another."[23] In the binary opposition of inner and outer what is not visible is that they are coextensive: each lies hidden in the other. The separation imposed by the concept of boundary, generated by the inside/outside binary, is the illusion that magical realism makes visible as an illusion.

Like inner and outer space, the space of periphery and center is also illusory, and like inner and outer space has ideological imperatives. The center is established in terms of power and powerlessness, but in magical realism, the distance between center and periphery is diffused and displacement occurs. How this occurs is, on the one hand, through the recognition and underscoring of the agency of those who are socially and historically located on the periphery and seen to be powerless, and, on the other hand, through a diminishment of the hegemonic power of those socially and historically located at the center.

In the first technique, those who are typically represented as weak, vulnerable, and lacking are often those who understand and fully engage both the magical and the real. Azaro, the spirit child of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992), is such a figure. Although buffeted by the world of adults, the child is nonetheless more of an agent in his life than the adult characters of the novel. The technique of diminishing hegemonic power is achieved by the simple act of calling into question the concept of causality. Those who stand at the center are assumed to be powerful/active, and therefore the center is a place of power. (Equally, those who stand at the periphery are assumed to be powerless/passive, and therefore the periphery is a place of powerlessness.) The logic here is one of causality wherein there is a perceived cause and effect relationship between the center and power. The issue is not whether power creates centers and centers create power, rather it is the logic assuming a law-like connection between the two. Once an immutable law is introduced, power, the center, and the law that binds them are reified—they are things for which people long for, seek after, die and kill for.

In magical realism, agency is available to those who would enact it while causality is a mere question mark; causal links are wishful thinking. In Anna Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993), Caridad's brutal rape has left her a mutilated woman: "Sofi was told that her daughter's nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat."[24] Caridad remains in the hospital for three months until she is returned home comatose and mutilated, but one evening a miracle occurs. After La Loca, the youngest daughter who operates in the magical realm, has a seizure Caridad walks across the dining room,

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[23] Rawdon Wilson "The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism." *Magical Realism*, 210.
[24] Ana Castillo, *So Far From God*. (New York: Plume, 1993), 33.

but "it wasn't the Caridad that had been brought back from the hospital, but a whole and once again beautiful Caridad…"[25] La Loca's infrequent seizures are never established in a causal relationship with the miraculous events that typically follow close on the heels of the seizures. The seizure and miracle are never explicitly linked, but by their close spatial association in the text there is an inference that they could be linked in a causal relationship if one so chooses. However, the author does not, either through narrative voice or through the characters, make such a link; the choice to construct one belongs to the reader.

In terms of agency, after Caridad's "holy resurrection," she meets a healer named Donña Felicia who recognizes and explains to her that she, Caridad, is a healer and indeed had healed herself through an act of will.[26] Caridad, who prior to her rape had little agency, claims agency and begins to live her life actively, thereafter becoming a center of power located on the periphery of the community: "So it was that during that Holy Week, instead of going to Mass at their local parishes, hundreds of people made their way up the mountain to la Caridad's cave in hopes of obtaining her blessing and just as many with hopes of being cured of some ailment or another."[27] Throughout the novel, the patterns of the taking up of agency and the disruption of the "laws" of causality are repeated, both of which alter space so that it "folds and refolds" and the center becomes the periphery and periphery the center. Each resides in the other.

The space of the text is itself magical. The exterior space of the text, front and back cover, the spine, and the papers glued between, is small and can indeed fit into a pocket or a bag. But the space in the text is a world with skies that open up unto infinity. This world of the text can be limited in order to mirror the finiteness imposed on the exterior world of the text, or it can foreground the infinite that exists simultaneously alongside the finite. In this play between the worlds—outside and inside the text, between the finite and infinite—the text as text is self-consciously presented. The magic that is part of the everyday and the mundane in magical realism brings to the reader an awareness that this is a text, a novel, or, in the case to be discussed, an ethnography. Further, the text itself can be represented in the text as in Gabriel García Màrquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1971). García Màrquez's textual character Melquíades is the writer of the novel One Hundred Years of Solitude, which another character in the novel, Aureliano, is working on deciphering. Locked in Melquíades' room is the book that Aureliano decodes: the story of his family written in Sanskrit.[28] Scott Simpkins indicates that García Màrquez "correlates the two events as though it were a textual possibility—which ultimately it may be. By doing this, he manages to go beyond

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[25] Ibid., 37.
[26] Ibid., 55.
[27] Ibid., 87.
[28] Gabriel García Màrquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Gregory Rabassa, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 421.

the bounds of realistic texts (mentioned earlier: 'However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page') as his text ends both literally and magically within itself."[29] In this self-consciousness of text, what one might call the artful meta-knowledge exhibited in the text, reification of the text as text is not possible; text is after all not a thing in-and-of-itself even if it has the material form of a book. This play between text and book, infinite and finite, is part of the play between the magical and real that allows for a persistence of vision where one is superimposed upon the other—folded and refolded.

The concept of time is another aspect that is folded and refolded in the writing strategy of magical realism. Time in the magical realist text is a fluid, continuous, and patterned affair. Like the names and stories repeated throughout the family genealogy in One Hundred years of Solitude, time turns in on itself or is like a house of mirrors reflecting the past, present, and future simultaneously: "[i]t was the history of the family, written by Melquíades, down to the most trivial details, one hundred years ahead of time … Melquíades had not put events in the order of man's conventional time [a final protection for the coded text], but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant."[30] Time does not flow in one direction, but rather spills out, spreading in all directions.

Lastly, the issue of reality, linked as it is to space and time, is another category that is reshaped in the magical realist text. In the magical realist text, reality and magic operate side-by-side, like the past, present, and future. In One Hundred Years of Solitude one reads of a banana strike that lead to the slaughter of thousands—three thousand according to the shocked and traumatized José Aracadio Segunda, a member of the genealogized family of the text who woke up in a boxcar on the death train that carried the slaughtered workers. Escaping, he returns to Macondo only to find out that the event did not happen. "The official version, repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government found at hand, was finally accepted: there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families, and the banana company was suspending all activity until the rains stopped."[31] Like the actual slaughter of banana strikers by the government of Columbia in December 1928, at the town of Ciénaga (thirty miles north of Aracataca), the event is erased. But more than this, the people of the Macondo wilfully choose this version of reality: "[i]n the three kitchens where José Arcadio Segundo stopped before reaching home they told him the same thing: 'There weren't any dead.'"[32] José Arcadio Segundo

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[29] Scott Simpkins, "Sources of Magic Realism/Supplements to Realism in Contemporary Latin American Literature." *Magical Realism*, 157.
[30] Gabriel García Màrquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gregory Rabassa, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 421.
[31] Ibid., 315.
[32] Ibid., 314.

retreats to the room of Melquíades to gaze again and again at the encoded text of Melquíades until the soldiers come looking for him. Entering the room, the soldier in command searches the room but fails to see José Arcadio Segundo sitting on the cot. Like the massacre, he too has become invisible to the naked eye.

Space, time, and reality—three constants each with their own particular laws are nebulous within the magical realist text. No longer fixed, static, and concrete, they slip across the mind leaving in their wake wonderment, wonderment as to how it was that we believed reason and rationality had moored space, time, and reality to human intention. Magical realism is a form of writing employing paradoxes in relation to space, time, and reality; it is precisely this kind of play that emerges in the ethnography of Michael Taussig.

A Case in Point: The Ethnographic Writings of Michael Taussig

Magical realism as a "genre" employed in literature is often associated with Latin America. Michael Taussig, an American anthropologist, has spent years doing field work in Latin America. His ethnographic texts include *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), Sh*amanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (1987), and *The Magic of the State* (1997). He has written three other texts that engage issues such as alterity, transgression, defacement, Hegel's concept of the negative, and terror.[33]

From the outset, Taussig's ethnographic writings challenge colonialist linearity and history. From his first ethnography to *The Magic of the State,* the emplacement of the south in relation to the north reverses polarities so that the north (a.k.a. the West) is seen as enmeshed in barbarous civility (e.g., enslavement[34] or the debt peonage of Latin American Indians[35]), negotiations with the devil (e.g., capitalism and its consumption[36]), pseudo cannibalism (e.g., the Kharisiri,[37]), and sexual licentiousness.[38] The binaries engaged by earlier texts about South America, as

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[33] The texts I am referring to are *Mimesis and Alterity*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), *The Nervous System*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), and *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[34] See Michael Taussig *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 41-92.

[35] See Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 60-73.

[36] See Michael Taussig *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America.*

[37] The *Kharisiri* (this term is derived from the Bolivian highlands but the figure is found throughout Latin America by various names, e.g. *nakaq* from the southern highlands of Peru) is a vampire-like figure that has had an interesting history in Latin America. Currently the *Kharisiri* takes the form of gringo doctors who drive around in jeeps scooping up the children of Indians and *Mestizo* in order to harvest and sell their organs. The *Kharisiri* is a wonderful metaphor that represents literally western capitalism and its consumption of the peoples and resources of Latin America. The *Kharisiri* is referred to in Michael Taussig *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, 143 and *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 237-238.

[38] See Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 46-48.

seen in the travelogue or the writings of missionaries, are partially inverted in order to call into question the representation of the "other," the indigena of Latin America. However, in the writing of ethnography, even if the civilization of the West is called into question by inversion, inversion tends to hold in place the paradigm: "[a]n order twice inverted is an order restored, perhaps even strengthened as a result of the exercise."[39] Taussig, though critical of the exploitation of the south by the north, nonetheless does not shift the ipseity/alterity binary in his more normative first ethnographic text, The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America. The primary binary of written/oral that gives positive value to the north and negative value to the south (even when those of the south are doing the writing) remains intact in the act of writing. In the act of writing, voice is presented by the same even if it is given to the other. In other words, the narrative form itself—writing—establishes the dominance of those who write even if they should be inclined not to take that position. Always the narrator, the ethnographer remains the master of the narrative and it is his/her position/view that the reader will take up.[40] The narrator is the expert and as such stands outside of the ethnography even if she/he momentarily places her/himself in the ethnography. The other remains the other under the inquisitive gaze of the ethnographer and reader.

Taussig's second ethnographic effort, Shamanism and the Wildman, begins the shift toward the use of magical realism as a genre for writing ethnography. In this text, one encounters a resistance to explanation or to dispelling what might appear to be fantastic. Time moves forward and backward, pre-history and history are merged, and the present and the past are seen as operative in the same moment. The ethnographer, Taussig, is enclosed by the ethnography, although he has yet to become simply a "character" of his own scripting. In this text, stories and actualities are merged so that holding to a difference/binary between myth and history, ritual and episode, symbol and utensil are made impossible. Therefore, the shaman is a tiger who is also a potential or realized revolutionary.[41] The drinking of yage under the shaman's tutelage reveals a vision (pinto) while one uncontrollably vomits and evacuates the bowels[42]; the books of magia are both symbol and instrument of magic.[43] In this second effort of ethnographic writing, the ethnographer, Taussig, is both narrator and character in the ethnographic story. As a result, Taussig is both subject and object and, to a small degree, is able to neutralize this binary at least in terms of himself; however, he is not as successful in giving subjectivity to those who are the objects of his study, although he struggles to do so. The act of writing, he as writer and his subjects as written,

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[39] From Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 159.
[40] This position is similar, I think, to that of professor and student in that the professor is the producer of knowledge and the student its consumer.
[41] See Taussig. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 358-412.
[42] Ibid., 435-446.
[43] Ibid., 259-273.

still precludes the possibility of escaping the binary conundrum of ipseity/alterity in Shamanism and the Wildman. Yet, his next ethnographic effort, *The Magic of the State* (1997), written after two theoretical texts—which critically engage northern subjectivity in relation to white global hegemony (*The Nervous System*, 1992) and examine the potential deconstructive capacities of the category of alterity (*Mimesis and Alterity*, 1993)—is framed by magical realism:

> How naturally we entify and give life to such. Take the case of God, the economy, and the state, abstract entities we credit with Being, species of things awesome with life-force of their own, transcendent over mere mortals. Clearly they are fetishes, invented wholes of materialized artifice into whose woeful insufficiency of being we have placed soulstuff. Hence the big S of the State. Hence its magic of attraction and repulsion, tied to the Nation, to more than a whiff of a certain sexuality reminiscent of the Law of the Father and, lest we forget, to the specter of death, human death in that soul-stirring insufficiency of Being. It is with this, then, with the magical harnessing of the dead for stately purpose, that I wish, on admittedly unsure and naive footing, to begin.[44]

Ipseity and Alterity

Taussig's ethnographic work, *The Magic of the State* (1997), fully manifests the discursive aspects of magical realism. This text draws no lines between the sacred and the profane, as both are the same, nor between the past and present for each is the moment of the other—the past is always written from the moment of the present and therefore the past is the present—nor between here and there, south and north. Two opposed but dependent concepts such as here and there, operating as a binary, are revealed to be singular, for the one cannot operate without the other. Equally, things that appear to exist in time and space, such as a national border, are both real and imaginary—real in that authorized persons with guns can shoot you if you cross over outside of the rules, but imaginary in that the border did not exist and could not exist for four and half billion years. Furthermore, one finds in Taussig's ethnography the dissolution of the binary of ipseity/alterity. In the "genre" of magical realism no fixity can be located, because all positions, whether spatial or temporal, are fluid. There is no certainty to hold onto as time and geography shift, and as these shift so do the characters of the text. In Taussig's writing of *The Magic of the State,* his position as narrator is transgressed by his role as a character (Captain Mission) in the ethnographic text:

> Captain Mission is trying to explain to the Chief Justice what goes on here. They are both determined to uphold the honor of the flag. One for piracy. The other against it. It is an old struggle. Catharsis, says the Chief. A thousand plateaus, Mission snaps back, eyes swimming with

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[44] Micheal Taussig, *The Magic of the State*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

vibrating intensity.[45]

Captain Mission, a character in Taussig's ethnographic text, holds the same position as the others in the text. Magical realism is a tool that does not allow the author to seek asylum in the safe role of objective narrator, but nor is the main protagonist (the author) allowed to disappear inside the character. Elsewhere he states:

> Perhaps what I discerned was that mill and mountain [the mountain of the spirit queen] served to reflect each other and thereby bring out something otherwise inaccessible and important to each other, the interesting and maybe important thing being that while the mountain, of course, leapt forth as a brilliant work of the imagination, a spectacle and awesome work of art, the lofty sugar mill at its base did not at first glance appear that way at all. Instead it appeared as something natural or at least as something mundane, secular, and taken for granted. While nature was celebrated on the mountain as part of the enchanted domain of the spirit queen, mistress of the serpents and dragons, the sugar mill was natural in that it belonged to utility, efficiency, the world of waged labor and modern commerce. But then you started to sense something else going on with the mill—perhaps because of the sharpness of its juxtaposition with this mist-laden mountain dedicated to profitless expenditure. For the mountain emitted a contagion across the boundaries set by the river, the wavy line of the sugarcane, and the high-voltage pylons strung along its base. Its presence hung as a pall pulsating across the countryside and right there as if preordained where all the world passed through Immigration Control to get to the mountain, right there at the point defined by the shrine of the Indio Macho and the entrance to the mill, the mountain demanded payment. For the owner of the Mill, the Cuban, has a contract with the spirit queen: she demands human life, otherwise production comes to a standstill.[46]

In magical realism, an ironical distance[47] must be maintained in order to ensure the realism of the text, but equally, the magical aspects must be viewed with respect. The divide between what is real and what is fantasy is blurred. This kind of transgression is equally required in terms of authorial voice in the text. Integral to an adequate employment within the boundaries of magical realism, the author cannot present his/her word as the final word on the events of the text, whether real or magical. We note in the passage above that Taussig does not rhetorically distance himself from the spirit queen, and indeed in this particular passage raises the mundane to the level of superordinate, or perhaps I should say, raises the superordinate to the level of the mundane. The real is not displaced by fantasy nor

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[45] Ibid., 53.
[46] Ibid., 27.
[47] For an interesting discussion of ironical distance see Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, "Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flabertain Parrot(ie)s." *Magical Realism*, 1-14.

is fantasy replaced by the real. Both are held in tension by the fact that they are each other. Taussig relates his crossing of the border:

> March 1988: pre-fieldwork; Arriving. 6:00 in the morning, tired, surrounded by men talking about money and making more of it, then an anxious silence as queues formed to go through immigration (note the almost familiar, almost animistic, usage here, "into immigration"– as though it's a thing with a mind, etc.). The men put on the Face and herd their families like sheep through the barrier, clutching passports in their hands like talismans endowed with magic by virtue of their transmitting the spermatic economy of the state. The Immigration Officer motions Mission brusquely to one side declaring deadpan he needs a visa. Mission says he's never needed one before. A few other "foreigners" join him penned in this no-man's land between and constitutive of Nation-States where the visa-less live… The streams of bodies shuffle through the gateway, grateful for the stamping received. Thuds and whacks fill the air. The percussion without which no rite of passage is possible.[48]

In *The Magic of State*, Taussig pushes at the boundaries of ethnography when he engages magical realism in order to tell the story of his on-and-off sojourn in Latin America. He does not establish himself as expert or authentic knower in this text but rather as a character; when he does this he relinquishes the role of master (omniscient) narrator. Captain Mission, as a mere character in the text along with others such as the Spirit Queen, the Liberator, Virgilio, Ofelia, or Katy, allows Taussig's narrative voice to be relativized; each character is more real or more fantastic depending on the events. Certainly, the ethnography remains written from Taussig's gaze, of which the reader shares of necessity, but this gaze is not the lofty gaze of an omniscient narrator speaking from the center of power, either located in the North or the institution of the university. Taussig does not take a professorial tone of knowledge dissemination; instead, he too is subject to the messiness of existence:

> She leaned forward as if challenging me. And doesn't a caricature capture the essence, making the copy magically powerful over the original? And what could be more powerful than the modern state? For the world of magic is changing, has changed … Wasn't it Lenin himself who wrote in 1919 … and her voice trailed away …Was this the magic she was referring to, and in that case would self-awareness help any, or was something else required? She grabbed my wrist. You want to know the secret don't you?[49]

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[48] Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, 151.
[49] Ibid., 5.

Conclusion

The writing experiment that produced an ethnographic text bounded and limited by magical realism produced a text that is somehow freer and with fewer limits. Although it is quite certain ethnographers will resist such a blurring of fiction and reality, truth and the fantastic, the past, present and future,[50] the question remains how one might take seriously the challenge to Western epistemology, and in association with this, the binary of ipseity/alterity, that the "posts"— postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postpatriarch-ialism—have underscored over the last several decades. Like others who have used autoethnography, and have engaged the genre of detective fiction (such as Nathan Wachtel), there is an attempt to be mindful of the multiplicities and shifting ground of contexts and webs of signification. Toward this end, Taussig's use of magical realism in *The Magic of the State* has sought to address such problems—to make apparent the shifting ground between ipseity/alterity. Although certainly other problems arise, the most important one, as Gabriel Gracía Màrquez commented, "you cannot invent or imagine whatever you like because you run the risk of telling lies…Even within what appears to be the utmost arbitrariness, there are laws. You can divest yourself of the fig-leaf of rationality, so long as you do not lapse into chaos, into total irrationality."[51] The question is: although Taussig's ethnography clearly operates within the laws of magical realism in *The Magic of The State*—his writing is not pure invention—what happens to ethnography as it is currently understood when his ethnography transgresses the laws of ethnographic writing? What happens to the facts the ethnographer is to report with greater or lesser objectivity?; Or need one be concerned with the facts considering where the obsession with naming and disseminating facts has lead in the past? It is clear that Taussig's *Magic of the State* transgresses the boundaries of legitimate ethnographic pursuit. It is also clear that this text makes apparent the narrativization of ethnography. But more than this, Taussig in this text challenges the boundaries between the real (facts) and imaginary (interpretation) by making recourse to the genre of magical realism. In this, he spills the ethnographic project so that it flows in all directions. In terms of writing traditional ethnography, narrative genres associated with fiction such as Romance, Epic, Comedy, and so forth are rejected (repressed?) and a proper mix of first-hand reporting (observation) and analysis (participation) must be engaged. In terms of the laws of

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[50] For a vitriolic review of Taussig's *The Magic of the State* see Micaela di Leonardo's review in *The Nation*, March 17, 1997 vol. 264 n.10: 35-38. For example she states: "Enter anthropologist Michael Taussig, a favourite on the Cultural Studies lecture circuit. His latest production, *The Magic of the State*, is a terrible book, badly written and embarrassingly banal. But it is bad and banal in very particular ways that have everything to do with contemporary culture wars and with the strange liminal status of American anthropology…." Leonardo rejects Taussig's work and considers him to be a charlatan anthropologist and academic, panning all of the work he has produced thus far. Others, however, have considered the book to be an excellent and interesting engagement with the writing of ethnography. For example, see Sally Falk Moore's review in *The American Journal of Sociology*, July 1998 vol. 104 n.1 264-265.
[51] In Williams, "Magical Realism and the Theme of Incest in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," 63 n5.

ethnography, Taussig's text is transgressive, and possibly transgression is one route that may lead of out the conundrum of the binary of ipseity/alterity. However, this does not mean that the operation of power between the South and North has changed in terms of real social relations between governments, people, economics or the military. What it does mean is that in terms of ethnographic representation, these relations are imagined otherwise. Further, what is made apparent is that the ethnographer is a bearer /shaper of knowledge but as such she/he can self-consciously engage and disseminate it with critical political awareness, or not. Finally, as to his own subjectivity, his ipseity, Taussig does not pretend he does not have recourse to this category, but rather through the use of the character of Captain Mission he makes apparent the irony of his place in this category: any one of us by accident of birth can land in either one, ipseity/alterity—neither is a natural category.[52]

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[52] I wish to thank William E. Arnal for his reading of, and editorial comments on, this paper.

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